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Art

Hide and Seek

Yet another group show that kinda/sorta explores identity

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Masked | Through July 27 at School 33



Bailey Doogan's "Four Fingered Smile."

In the early 1960s Crayola changed the name of its "flesh" crayon color to "peach," responding to the changing times, just as Indian Red was renamed Chestnut in the late 1990s. No more would such early childhood implements reinforce negative cultural assumptions about the color of people's skin--but it doesn't make matching skin color any easier, a fact bluntly illustrated in Elena Patino's "Me By Others, Others By Me." In this installation, part of School 33's current *Masked* exhibition, Patino offers an array of 5-by-7 inch wood panels, on which she and 25 other people tried to approximate each other's skin color in paint. For each sitting, Patino pairs her take on her interpretation of her partner's skin and her version of her own skin with the other person's interpretation of Patino's skin tone and his/her own skin color. The result is a visual analog for the social construction of race, where something as simple as skin color becomes a fluctuating idea--sometimes even to Patino, whose own take on her skin isn't constant.

Such an oblique look at such a complex web of social knowledge is what *Masked* offers at its finest moments; at other times, the exhibition is merely yet another look at identity. In her curator's statement in *Masked's* accompanying catalog, curator Joan Weber claims the show examines the "ways identities are created, hidden or revealed" and that the idea of

masking "often reveals as much as it conceals," but she opens a very wide thematic umbrella to include everything on view here. Too often this idea of the mask is quite literal, a physical boundary between the self and the external world that the artist uses to explore some social construct. Only rarely does the "mask" become intimately part of the subject, as it does in Patino's "Me By Others, Others By Me," where the lines separating outward appearances and internal idea are not just blurred but obliterated, and you can't talk about identity from a comfortable distance.

In those moments, *Masked* comes down to representation--and while Weber "isn't sure what extra information is added" by the fact that all included artists are women, given the show's theme, it makes a certain obvious sense. Women's bodies and identities are constantly contested representational grounds, the object of the erotic gaze and the focus of consumer culture, to which the countless glossy images in fashion magazines and web sites attest. Susan Fenton's nine photographs here are typically portraits or head shots of women, and they recall fashion spreads or magazine covers, though her images are slightly skewed from the seductive, objectifying norm. She shoots her woman against neutral, often silvery grey or black backgrounds, in configurations that could be fashion spreads for hats or hairstyles or something, only Fenton spotlights her women subjects by slightly obscuring them. In "White Gauze Mask" a woman's head has been wound in gauze, standing in front of a fan. She's topless, or looks to be, although the image is cropped just below the clavicle. If you look close enough you can just make out her open left eye peeking through the sheer gauze. It's a creepy detail, the lone element reminding you that another living person is modeling the fan and mummy wrap instead of some passive model. It's an arresting effect, but little more.

Other such heavy handed imagery--Inga Frick's and Elsa Mora's photography, Bailey Doogan's technically virtuosic drawings "Five-Fingered Grin" and "Four Fingered Smile" in the second floor gallery, Lynden Cline's "Bound" installation and "Self-Portrait"--riff on the identity theme, but don't push any buttons past the emotional: They feel too literal, as if merely turning an observation into an event. Even more curious are J.J. McCracken's "Living Sculpture, CelloVignette," a mixed-media installation for performance. Included in *Masked* is a photo documentation of the project--it involves coating women in clay for performance--and a video of a performance itself. Visually, McCracken's process is stunning--when the mud/clay dries it achieves a marble-like sheen, turning the women into statuary--but it's emotionally flat and listless, like a jazz soloist with a to-die-for tone, but no sense of melody.

What stands out here are the works that riff on the *Masked*'s theme--such as Dawn Black's "Conceal Project," an array of images. Here small gouache, watercolor, and ink on paper portraits of various people--in animal or fetish masks, in costumes, wearing traditional non-Western clothing, heads wrapped in checked scarves and holding a firearm aloft, etc.--smear the idea of a mask to its breaking point, as the line separating what somebody is wearing to pretend to be someone and what somebody is wearing because it's an extension of who they are isn't always clear.

The show's standout works skim the show's thematic surface and then move into richer territory. Athena Tacha's "Rape Patches," "Breast Patches," and "Chemotherapy Mask" are bold, witty confrontations of life-altering events, while Phyllis Plattner's combines politics and reverence into startling pieces. Plattner puts the masked guerillas of Chiapas' Zapatista rebels into Renaissance altar pieces, complete with sunshine-bright gold leaf. They're violent and mysterious, seductive and foreboding, and they offer the best reminder here of the tension that always lurks between the public face and the private mind.